

MASSACRE RIM WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

1. THE STUDY AREA - 101,290 acres

The Massacre Rim WSA (CA-020-1013) is located within Washoe County, in northwest Nevada. The WSA ranges in elevation from 5,520 to 6,780 feet and includes Massacre Rim and all of the Massacre and Bitner benches and their southern slopes. The topography is generally rolling, open terrain dominated by sagebrush, with scattered juniper in the western portion of the WSA. Massacre Rim, a 1,200 foot fault block exposure, dominates the northwestern portion of the WSA. The WSA is bounded by the Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge, Nevada Highway 34, private lands, the Cottonwood Canyon Road, the Bald Mountain Canyon Road and the Bitner and Bitner Butte Roads on the northern portion. On the south side, the WSA is bounded by Nevada Highway 8A, the Salt Grass-Evans Road, private property, the West Lake-Johnson Reservoir Road, the Little Basin Spray Road, and a 750 KV powerline. Cedarville, California is 30 miles west, Susanville, California is 105 miles southwest and Reno, Nevada is 150 miles south.

Based on the October 1991 Nevada BLM Statewide Wilderness Report, the WSA includes 101,290 acres of BLM lands and surrounds 784 acres of private inholdings. However, in the 1995 Bitner-Massacre Lands Exchange, BLM acquired 400 acres of the private inholdings.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE - 22,465 acres recommended for wilderness 78,825 acres recommended for nonwilderness

Recommended is designating 22,465 acres as wilderness and releasing 78,825 acres for uses other than wilderness. About half of the area not recommended for wilderness (44,870 acres) is proposed to be managed as an Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) to provide special protection and management to the significant cultural resources found on the Massacre Bench. The area recommended for wilderness designation encompasses the highest wilderness values in the WSA, including outstanding naturalness and opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation and solitude. The area released for non-wilderness uses includes human disturbances related to project development, woodcutting and vehicle ways. This portion of the WSA also has some mineral potential associated with a historic mining district.

The recommended wilderness boundary closely follows the Bitner grazing allotment boundary for several reasons. Due to limited livestock water availability, the allotment has better range conditions than many allotments in the surrounding area. These conditions contribute significantly to the overall naturalness of the recommended wilderness. Naturalness is also reinforced by limited human imprints. Man made projects are a few small stock ponds and spring developments, with no affect on overall naturalness. These water developments do improve summer water availability to wildlife, particularly antelope and mule deer, allowing higher population levels than would occur without the projects. Wilderness manageability is also improved because the allotment boundary fence line provides a continuous, distinctive on the ground boundary for the recommended wilderness. Without the fences, the nature of the Bitner Table is such that maintaining an area free from cross country vehicle travel would be difficult.

Excellent scenic vistas of up to 60 miles are provided from many locations within the recommended wilderness. The screening provided by the topographic breaks and the lack of visitor use combine to create an impression of isolation from the civilized world. This isolation provides outstanding opportunities for solitude. The area has limited vehicle access and is one of the few places in northwest Nevada where hunting is limited to walking or saddle horse use rather than 4-wheel drive vehicles. As result, the area has higher densities of sage grouse than surrounding areas and the mule deer and antelope are commonly in the trophy classes.

Conflicts with other resource uses in the recommended wilderness are limited. Grazing use on the area will continue. The minor imprint associated with livestock water facilities will remain due to regular maintenance activities. There are no activities proposed on the 120 acres of private lands which would impair wilderness values. The USGS/BLM minerals survey indicate a moderate potential for gold, silver, mercury and uranium, but no claims have been filed.

The 78,825 acres of the WSA recommended for uses other than wilderness have significantly lower naturalness and opportunities for primitive recreation than the portion of the WSA recommended as wilderness. The exceptional archaeological values would be better managed under an ACEC designation. ACEC designation would permit extensive excavations and a public interpretation and education program. The nonwilderness lands have several resource conflict areas including a fuelwood harvest area, a historic mining district, several vegetative conversion projects for livestock and numerous small projects which would require regular maintenance activities. Management of portions of the area released for uses other than wilderness would be difficult due to the lack of effective barriers to cross country vehicle travel. Based upon all of the factors listed, the needs of the area would be best served if the area were released from wilderness consideration.

3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS

A. Naturalness: The western edge is formed by a spectacular fault scarp with huge rims above vegetated talus slopes. The WSA is primarily natural in character. The remainder of the area consists of a series of wide benches generally sloping gently toward the south. The benches are covered primarily by great expanses of grey/green low sagebrush not exceeding two feet in height. Pockets with deeper soils support western juniper and big sagebrush. Several small but important spring fed meadows form islands of green in the rocky, shallow soils. The eastern two-thirds above the rim contain few man related intrusions while the western third and the southern and northern boundary areas contain practically all of the man caused intrusions. These portions of the WSA correspond to the recommended wilderness and the recommended nonwilderness respectively.

B. Solitude: The Massacre Rim WSA contains outstanding opportunities for solitude. The large size of the Massacre Rim WSA allows for solitude. The terrain and vegetation do not provide a significant degree of screening, however, the vastness of the WSA would allow a moderate number of visitors to enjoy solitude. The lack of topographic and vegetative screening precludes the opportunities for absolute seclusion. The opportunities for solitude are better on the recommended wilderness portion of the WSA due to a lack of vehicular access.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation: The vastness of the Massacre Rim WSA contributes to limited opportunities for wilderness type recreation such as hiking, backpacking, and camping. Excellent wildlife values also provide opportunities for viewing and hunting.

D. Special Features: The WSA contains outstanding cultural resources associated with 10,000 years of human occupancy in the Massacre Lakes Basin. A wide range of site types are found on the around the Massacre Bench. The sites are proposed for excavation, preservation, and public interpretation depending upon their type, condition, and location. Extensive excavation of approximately ten sites has been proposed. These excavations would require surface disturbance of up to several acres per site and a field camp for 15 to 20 persons for a least one field season. Many of the sites and groupings of sites are eligible for the national Register of Historic Places due the unique and special research values the sites provide.

4. MANAGEABILITY

The area recommended for wilderness can be effectively managed as wilderness. Ways are present but effective closures can be erected.

The portion of the WSA recommended for uses other than wilderness could also be managed as wilderness. However, several parts of the area including the southern area and the western half of the Massacre Bench would make wilderness management more difficult. Most of these areas are open, rolling terrain dominated by sparse stands of low growing sagebrush. It is common practice for hunters to drive their vehicles cross country to avoid long walks.

5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES

The WSA contains portions of one mining district (Lone Pine) with a potential for significant mineral values.

The U.S. Geological Survey/Bureau of Mines study of the recommended wilderness (U.S. Geological Survey Bulletin #1707) found no identified metallic or non-metallic resources. The report identifies a moderate potential for gold, silver and mercury in hydrothermal deposits on the eastern portion of the area recommended for wilderness designation. There is a moderate potential for uranium on the northern and eastern portions of the WSA. There are no mineral leases in this WSA. The whole WSA is considered by USGS to have very low potential for low and gas. The potential for geothermal resources is rated low. There are no known new prospecting activities or claims in the WSA.

6. SUMMARY OF WSA-SPECIFIC PUBLIC COMMENTS

During the formal public review of the draft EIS a total of 345 comments specifically addressing the WSA were received. Written comments consisted of 333 letters while 12 oral comments were received at three public hearings. Sixty-two comments supported the proposed recommendation, 276 comments supported more wilderness than the Proposed Action and seven comments supported no wilderness. Those favoring the Proposed Action mentioned the consensus reached by the public working group (TRT) and reiterated the wilderness values of the WSA. Those who commented in favor of no wilderness and more wilderness than the recommendation, mentioned non-specific concerns about wilderness values or resource conflicts.